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ON PAGE **A-13**

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Habits of The Soviet Dinosaur

As a gradually emerging Reagan administration prepares to take over responsibility for dealing with the septuagenarians in the Kremlin, it is faced with disturbing evidence that, in spite of its massive espionage apparatus, the Soviet regime at the top may be dangerously out of touch with reality.

Public testimony from recent defectors to the West from the Russian bureaucratic elite suggests that the Politburo is much less well equipped to reach sober and accurate judgments on the significance of world events than was previously thought by many American Kremlinologists.

Although there was always the fear that ideological preconceptions exercised a distorting effect on Soviet decision-making, the hope flourished that policy recommendations before they reached the top were rendered more realistic by the array of 300 talented analytical experts assembled in Georgii Arbatov's Institute of the United States and Canada, reporting directly to the Kremlin from its prestigious location in the Academy of Sciences.

A First-Hand View

Carter officials have been badly shaken in this hopeful assumption by an article in the October issue of *The Atlantic*. It is a fascinating interview with a 33-year-old woman, Galina Orionova, who defected last year in London after working for 10 years as a professional expert on the staff of Arbatov's institute. Her first-hand revelations are devastating to the myth that this institute can in any way be relied on to moderate extreme views in the Kremlin.

According to Galina, the institute is staffed largely by the privileged offspring of the Moscow party elite, and the only time they all show up for work is on payday. The research effort is confined to paraphrasing American publications, which though sold openly in the U.S. are classified secret in Moscow. She states, "We'd be lucky if more than 2 per cent of what we wrote was read by anybody who mattered."

Although she had a high regard for Arbatov's own intelligence, she became convinced that his institute was little more than a front for a complex disinformation and espionage operation designed "to get as much as possible - politically and materially - out of the policy of détente."

By masquerading as if it was an American think tank like the Brookings Institution, it has been quite successful in persuading a generation of visiting American officials and scholars that there are in fact rational doves in the Kremlin whose beneficent influence on Soviet policy may be undermined if the U.S. reacts too strongly to Soviet aggressive moves.

With the professional staff of the institute heavily infiltrated by KGB agents, all staffers have to cooperate with the KGB in supplying detailed information on the personal habits and vulnerabilities of their American contacts in order to set them up for recruitment. By the appearance of diligent cooperation, Galina finally won permission to travel abroad and used the occasion to defect to the British.

Having lost all faith in the Soviet system and its ideology, Galina felt compelled to escape out of "black boredom." Looking back, she warns, "The Soviet Union is like a huge, primitive dinosaur, with a small brain, but armed from top to tail."

A Mass of Information

If the Arbatov institute can no longer be counted on as a restraining influence on Soviet policy, there remains the ironic hope that the sheer scale of Soviet espionage supplies the Kremlin with enough factually-accurate information to reduce the danger of miscalculation or ideological self-deception. But even here recent testimony from highly-placed KGB defectors is not reassuring.

In a series of interviews with *The Times* of London earlier this year, Ilya Dzhirkvelov, who defected to the British, described how as a KGB officer he served in Africa. There, he saw the rigid application of communist doctrine to complex African tribal disputes result in such disaster that only the introduction of Cuban troops could save the day, as in Angola and Ethiopia.

More disturbingly, he describes the KGB as so riddled with nepotism and careerist ambition that much of the political reporting sent back to Moscow was deliberately skewed to fit the ideological preconceptions of the doctrinaire old men on the Politburo.

In addition, the FBI and the CIA have in the last year succeeded in engineering the defection of two of the most significant KGB officers ever to switch sides. They are still under security wraps, but according to their testimony the KGB's passion for stealing classified U.S. policy documents stems from the realization that this is the only safe way of bringing unpalatable facts to the Kremlin's attention. The documents speak for themselves and do not implicate the messenger in any critical judgment of the Kremlin's performance.

Faced with this heavily-armored but blinkered dinosaur in Moscow, Ronald Reagan is certainly right to have called for "a margin of safety" in our defensive military preparations.